Difference in Musical Ability Due More to Training Than to Heredity

By EVELYN FLETCHER-COPP.

It is generally supposed that musicians are born, not made. A modern student of heredity, for example, writes of musical ability:

"This quality is one that develops so early in the most marked cases that its innateness cannot be questioned. A Bach, matured at twenty-two; a Beethoven, publishing his compositions at thirteen, and a Mendelssohn at fifteen; a Mozart, composing at five years, are the product of a peculiar protoplasm of whose tenacious qualities we get some notion when we learn that the Bach family comprised twenty eminent musicians and two-score others less eminent."

Following out this line of attack, let us look a little further for evidence that musical ability is innate. Of the Bach family I shall not speak, for its history is well known; it presents an amount of musical genius unrivalled in history. But if we examine the ancestry of other great musicians, including some of those mentioned by the writer just quoted, we find little to indicate that their preëminent musical ability was due to any extraordinary combination of heredity.

Among such cases is Haydn. His father was a wheelwright, his mother had been a cook and, although both were fond of music, neither could be reckoned a musician as we diagnose the term. Schubert is another example, and the immortal Robert Schumann had no ancestors who were even slightly addicted to music. Even the musicians who can point to a musical parent or grandparent have, in many striking instances, seemingly failed to transmit to their offspring even a trace of their stupendous ability. Another interesting point which strikes even the casual observer of the musicians of the past is that musical heredity seems to be anti-suffrage. When heredity might seem to have caused musical ability in the sons the daughters seem usually not to have been extraordinarily benefited; and in this connection it is also of interest to note that, while many women have excelled as vocal or instrumental performers, the originality necessary to musical composition has been conspicuously lacking and there are no women who come even within hailing distance of Beethoven, Mozart, Handel and a dozen other men we might name.

A Common Inheritance.

Now, I do not propose to argue from these facts that musical ability is not a matter of heredity. I think it is a matter of heredity, but that almost every one possesses the heredity. Twenty years of teaching give me reason to believe that, although great genius will doubtless continue to be sporadic and unaccountable, real musical ability is much more common than has been supposed. Genius, like murder, will out. It cannot be suppressed by environment obstacles, but talent, often overlooked, may be discovered and brought to great perfection. It seems, indeed, that music, like poetry, may be a primal talent; that, as all children are born poets, they may also be born musicians, and also, very similarly, that as 99 per cent of humanity lose all poetic faculty during the years of early childhood because of the artificial conditions of modern child life, so the very large majority of children loso their native musical ability through lack of training of the ear and mind during their most susceptible period. Education should come to the help of heredity to reclaim and develop man's natural gift.

We are all born with ears, and they are formed for hearing, as the eye is for seeing; they are, moreover, capable of hearing far more and better than they are accustomed to doing. We carry them around with us everywhere, but we really pay very little attention to them. We let our children speak in a slipshod, indistinct way, and we listen carelessly. We leave good talking and singing to the professional musicians and orators, which is just as unreasonable as to leave good seeing to the professional artist and poet. We are only just beginning to learn what the normal ear is capable of; for instance, in the matter of positive pitch—that is, ability to recognize and name musical tones. The lay public bas been accustomed to consider positive pitch as a gift wrapped in the exclusive tissue of genius and doled out to the ultra-musical only. One who can enter a room where a musician is singing or playing and say, "He is singing high C or barytone B" has hitherto been looked upon as a prodigy. This is by no means necessarily true. By proper training this power may be acquired, speaking very conservatively, by 80 per cent of normal children. Children who have been thought to be entirely lacking in musical ability, some of them apparently tone deaf, after a few months of training are able to sing "centre C" on demand and to recognize it when it is played or sung, and they soon become equally familiar with the other musical tones.

Hundreds of Cases Studied.

I base this statement on the experience of having taught some hundreds of children; the corroborative experience of the teachers I have trained would add hundreds more cases. Certainly I do not say that every one can acquire, by training, this once mysterious gift of Positive Pitch, but I know that most people can do so, if they begin at an early age.

This surely indicates that musical talent is much more widespread than has been thought and that the cases we have quoted of the appearance of wonderful ability in the children of seemingly non-musical parents, may be merely instances of the inheritance of latent characters.

Some children will, of course, not acquire Positive Pitch as quickly as others. There are children who do not so easily learn to write English from dictation as others, but do we therefore allow them to give up and say that they cannot be taught? By the time he is ten or twelve any normal child can learn to write correctly from dictation five hundred words or more. Now, taking every white and black key on the piano there are only eighty-eight. Given a fair chance and a mind unmesmerized by the idea that reading music and Positive Pitch are difficult and require special gift, a child may as easily see mentally the sign for any sound as he sees the words that he hears you dictate to him in English.

That the results of music study have hitherto been so meagre is due to parental indifference and the faultiness of the methods of teaching music. Teachers have insisted that the child should not be allowed to play the piano by ear, claiming that this will ruin his musical ear and make reading by sight impossible! Fancy a mother fearing that if her child speaks English first by ear he will never learn to read it! As music is primarily an art making its first and greatest appeal through the ear, it is unreasonable to suppress the interest and initiative which naturally appear first through the ear, and then, later on, by laborious ear training lessons to try to get back the interest and power which we have ignored during the most formative period of the child's life.

Music Easily Acquired.

The acquirement of musical education is or should be comparatively easy, not only because of the smaliness of the musical vocabulary (consisting, as we have said, of only eighty-eight tones), but also because of the universality of its notation. The present system of musical notation, though perhaps not perfect, has this great advantage, that it is the same all over the civilized world, so that when one learns it in America, the musical thoughts of France, Spain, Germany, Italy or Russia are equally accessible. A child learns to read English easily and well during the first six years of his school life (that is, from the age of six to twelve); he might just as easily learn during the same time to read fearlessly and well the universal language of music.

If you were to visit a public school and express surprise that the washwoman's daughter reads as well as the child of your own cultured neighbor you would be told that "thanks to the system" the advantages of birth are being wonderfully counterbalanced; that, though the effects of a few generations of culture may tell in other ways, no one is dependent upon his forefathers for ability to read, spell or write. Scientific teaching makes these things possible to all mankind.

Exactly as normal is the ability to learn to read and think music.

The first conclusion, then, which I venture to lay before students of heredity is that they have, with the material at present available, no proper ground for drawing conclusions as to the distribution of musical talent in the population, because there is a great deal which is merely latent, having been denied the possibility of expression. The inheritance of a trait and the expression of a trait are two different things. No student of heredity would consciously ignore the distinction, but in the study of the inheritance of musical ability they have unconsciously ignored it, and therefore their results do not correspond with the reality.

Time and again, as I have said, I have taken children from families where there was apparently no musical ability and where the child himself was supposed to be utterly deficient in music. The student of heredity, I fear, would unhesitatingly have set down such a child as non-musical because of failure to inherit the prerequisites. Yet this child, after being educated in a natural manner, has acquired positive pitch, has learned to compose, to express his own feelings musically, and to analyze compositions which would baffle many teachers.

Thus, although a child may come from a supposedly unmusical family, it by no means follows that the child cannot develop musical ability of a high order. On the other hand, what of the cases where the child of two musical parents fails to show talent?

I have in mind one striking case of this sort which I met years ago. The father was a pianist of international renown, the mother a gifted musician. They hoped, of course, that their child, with its double inheritance, would surpass either one of them; they confidently expected such a result. The child was set to studying music at an early age, but made no progress whatever; he was declared to be dull, uninterested, hopeless.

I was naturally curious to find the reason for this state of affairs, and they were not hard to find. Almost the first inquiry I made disclosed the fact that the child showed a dislike for tedious hours of practicing, and was therefore frequently shut up in a dark closet for an hour or two at a time, to instill in him a greater love for his lessons, and a spirit more obedient to the wishes of his parents. Small wonder that he lost interest in music; and without interest, without an eagerness to learn, little can be done. But where the interest and will exist, it is an unusually defective child that cannot acquire a considerable amount of musical ability; and the same to a less extent holds good of adults. Perhaps it may be of interest if I explain in a little detail the views on this point to which twenty years of teaching have brought me.

If the motive for studying music be made clear and the method of teaching be sound, we may count confidently on the results. Browning says: "It is better Youth should strive, through acts uncouth, toward making, than repose on aught found made." We have made the mistake in music teaching in the past of putting the finished product of another's mind before our children and forcing them to copy it. Behind this mistake is the wrong motive. The main idea was to force the child to copy, parrot-like, at the earliest possible moment, the thoughts of some one else. Music was looked upon merely as a means of adornment, as something to be plastered on the outside to add to the attractiveness of the child. The motive is altogether wrong. Not slavery to some one else's ideas but freedom to express one's own ideas should be the aim. Watch a tiny child seated on his mother's knee. She has been playing and he has been told to keep his little paddies on her wrists, but presently he pushes her hands aside and substitutes for the beautiful composition his own incoherent pattings and poundings of the keys, striving "through sounds uncouth" to express himself; but, alas! he is stopped. It is as though a two-year-old should toddle to his mother and stammer with his crooked little tongue: "See, mamma, de sun is playing hide and go seek wif me," and the mother should say: "You must not talk that way, my child. You should say, as Homer writes, 'Lo! Dawn, the rosy fingered, opes wide the gates of Day.'" What would be the effect of this classical method of teaching English upon one's joy and proficiency in acquiring the mother tongue?

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"WHY SHOULD I STUDY THEORY?"

By HARVEY B. GAUL.
(From The Etude.)

The other day I happened in a friend's studio just as a girl pupil was departing. He, the teacher, was telling her about some reference books which would be helpful for a fuller comprehension of Brahms. Among other things he suggested a book on theory. As the pupil was going out she said:

"Why should I study theory?"

The question was guileless and took the teacher by surprise. He looked at her, smiled and said:

"Why should artists study anatomy, or school teachers psychology? Simply because those studies are indispensable for a thorough equipment in their professions. Next Tuesday," continued he, "I will tell you in detail why you should have a working knowledge of theory, providing it doesn't dawn on you before."

Many pupils must wonder why they should study theory. Theory to many a pupil must be like Latin to school children, a study which they think apparently useless. In schoolboy phraseology, "What's the use?"

If theory does nothing else it assists, as does a college education, in the training of the mind.

The reasons for studying theory are manifold and incontrovertible.

First—Theory will give you a discriminating mind, which is as essential in music as in literature. When you listen to music you will do it in a critical and understanding manner. You will not carp, but comprehend.

Second—You will know why you like certain kinds of music and why you dislike others, which is as necessary as knowing why certain pictures have an "appeal" and others have none.

Third—It will enable you to look through reams of music, and to choose the wheat from the tares, as you choose the good from the bad drama. You will know why certain pieces contain advantageous teaching material and why divers other pieces are empty and unprofitable.

Fourth—You will be able to judge a true composer from a musical constructor, *i. e.*, one who has a message, and not merely an imitative faculty. You may readily believe that composers who have something worth while to say are not too numerous. They are quite as rare as real poets.

Fifth—It will aid in your interpretation of music, and that is the *summum bonum* of the whole thing. You will know why such a piece should go thus, and not thus, because you have knowledge and the traditions, and know why a piece was written.

Sixth and lastly: You are not a well trained musician unless you have a thorough knowledge of music, and music is not merely playing the piano; it, like every other art, has its theoretical features. One cannot be a good actor unless one knows why people under certain conditions and circumstances do certain things. One truly cannot be a well trained musician unless one knows *all* the conditions and circumstances.

Theory is an inclusive study—that is, it has many subdivisions. They are harmony, counterpoint, fugue, form and history. These, beside an executive technique, form the modus operandi of music.

Harmony is the grammar of music, and is useful every day; counterpoint is the rhetoric, and is necessary; fugue is syntax, and without it we cannot arrange nor analyze; form is composition, and is essential to thorough appreciation, and history, well, history is history. If we would know the story of music as the story of peoples and nations we must learn the story of music.